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Back Yard Bocce

By Lou Fancher



Alissa and Bill Scanlin play Bocce on their home court; their vineyard rises in the background. Photos Andy Scheck
out Alissa.

"The biggest challenge we had was making sure it didn't slide," Alissa says. "Because it's at the base of a hill." "We had drainage problems, with mud coming over the path before," Bill says, "but now, even the big rains don't cause trouble."

McLane says bocce courts are inherently simple, in terms of construction. "It's basically just building a rectangle. The most difficult part is to maintain a very fine level across the court." Most courts, without extensive grading issues like the Scanlins', can be completed within one week.

But selecting the correct materials and knowing where to save and where to splurge, has a dramatic affect on the bottom line. "Oyster shell materials are wickedly expensive," says McLane. "I used track fines-or "decomposed granite," which is the generic term-as the base material."

The fines, the sand-like material topping the Scanlin bocce court, is spread over compacted base rock. The border is a versalock block wall: a gravity wall system with no mortar. Decking material forms the inside frame, reducing the wear and tear on the bocce balls.

There's no way McLane could "construct" the court's fabulous view of Mount Diablo. But a strategically placed gazebo offers spectators an unobstructed view of both the court and the sweeping vista.

Jeanne HuangLi and Nathan Ogle moved to Orinda in August of 2009. Their home, built by architect Paul Hamilton in 1951, is nestled in a nearly-vertical hillside just north of Highway 24. On approach, it's difficult to picture anything being flat, let alone the fine-tuned leveling a bocce court requires.

Looking down from the balcony, the back yard court extends away from the house. Unlike the Scanlins, the HuangLi-Ogle family's court was already in place when they purchased the home.

"My first instinct was whether we could dig it up and make it a wading pool," HuangLi says. "But actually, it's been really popular."

The couple has discovered bocce adds to any gathering, from birthdays to the large alumni parties they host. HuangLi is the Senior Director of Development and Alumni Relations at the Haas School of Business in Berkeley. She's also the president of the University of Michigan's Bay area alumni chapter, boasting 15,000 members.

"We've hosted send-offs for new U of M students-all kinds of events. It's not dependent on athletic ability, so anyone can participate and be competitive," she says.

Ogle believes the court was installed in the early 1980's, when the water systems were moved from the yard to the road. "The leech field, where the sewer system went, was right there," he says, pointing to the court.

Italians, Romans, and even the Pope have played Bocce; and now, the sport with a touch of Italy is arriving in many Lamorinda back yards. Constructing a home bocce court is not just a matter of pulling a few weeds, spreading a layer of sand, and inviting the neighbors over for a frame or two. Home courts involve landscaping, construction, design, and an experienced professional who understands your yard. Climate, sun and shade, drainage, maintenance, and the final touch, aesthetics, all weigh in to the equation.

This year, Alissa and Bill Scanlin embarked on a large landscaping project behind their sprawling Lafayette home. The Scanlin's have had a vineyard since 1998, but wanted to expand the operation. Working with Mike McLane, of Michael's Landscape Construction, the couple decided a bocce court would be the perfect solution for the northeast corner of their yard.

"Whenever we played bocce, we always enjoyed it. Drinking a glass of wine and playing bocce: it's good entertainment," says Bill. "You can be talking about other things and still keep playing."

The sport's increasing popularity means many guests already know how to play, and even for the novices, the rules are simple, points

The entire family gets into the action when son Paul, 11 and daughter Luzia, 6, join in. Because the court has lights, evening play is frequent. "Paul here, he'll be a ringer," says HuangLi. "We have to say, 'Let the other guests play,' because he's so competitive. And Luzia, she likes to throw out the little white ball (also called the "jack," "boccino" or "pallina," depending on who you're playing with) to get things started."

Although they've now purchased a good supply of balls, their first balls were found amidst the overhanging oaks on the hills surrounding the court. The trees provide shade and make play more enjoyable, HuangLi says. And provide plenty of opportunities for raking, adds Ogle, with a laugh.

All four family members say having a court has added to their social life. They're planning a recruiting bocce party for a local boy scout troop and Ogle says being on the court reminds him of his beloved Virginia roots. "I've thrown a lot of rocks at a lot of critters in my day, and almost as good."

The response to the Lamorinda Weekly's call for home bocce court stories was overwhelming. Scott Bronsteen left a phone message about his experience, saying, "We've got 4 young kids and it just seems like the kind of thing where both sexes and all ages can participate. It's a good family thing, and entertaining for when you have couples over. Ours is smack under Redwood trees, so it gets more needles on it than I'd like to see on there, but otherwise, we really enjoy it."

Thank you to all who emailed or called. With the sport's booming popularity, we may even have to run a sequel.



A French Drain, on the right, prevents drainage problems.

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